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ABSTRACT

Experiencing literature is the first step toward becoming a literary critic. The primary task of the literary critic is to understand and explain what is experienced and then to interpret works of literature in relation to all the literature the student knows. To help children grow as critics of literature it is necessary to broaden their experiences by presenting them with the best from among a wide variety of children's literature, old and new. Also, guidance must be given to young critics to encourage insights into the significance of individual literary works and to assist them toward an understanding of literature as a coherent body of interrelated works, relating both to each other and to popular media forms such as advertisements, pop songs, comics, and the situation comedies and police shows of television. To stimulate wider reading, interest inventories with open-ended questions can be used. Word-of-mouth, personal testimonies, book talks, Readers' Theater presentations, displays, talks by authors, and planned discussions are all successful techniques in helping enlarge children's experience with fine books. The unit approach to literary study is an effective way to help young critics grow in making connections among literary works. Experience, through study examined and clarified, leads to a conception of literature as a coherent structure, to an understanding of how imagination works in the creation of art in words. (Thirty-one references are appended.) (MS)

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Helping Children to Grow as Critics of Literature

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Helping Children to Grow as Critics of Literature

> The critic's function is to interpret every work of literature in the light of all the literature he knows, to keep constantly struggling to understand what literature as a whole is about.
>
> Northrop Frye

Children begin to be literary critics even before they can talk, wriggling off a lap if a story doesn't please them or snuggling down to hear it again--and again, if it does. We recognize the mark of the critic on dogeared copies of old favorites on a toddler's bookshelf and on well-worn picture books in the public library. When older readers can't find the lastest Silverstein or Cleary or Blume on the library shelves, they register their preference for these books by filling out reserve cards at the librarian's desk. In expressing these preferences, children are continuing to be critics of literature. But there is more to being a critic than just knowing what we like.

Growth as a critic is based upon knowledge. Experiencing literature is therefore the first step toward becoming a critic of it. However, just as experiencing a city full of buildings is not studying architecture, so experiencing poems and stories is not studying literature. Furthermore, experience is not directly transmittable from one to another, which makes the direct teaching of literature impossible. What we teach and learn when we study literature, from kindergarten through graduate school, is criticism.

Criticism, in this sense, is not evaluative criticism such as the book reviewer engages in, but scholarly criticism in which the critic's primary task is to understand and explain what is experienced. It is the attempt of students to interpret works of literature in relation to all the literature they know. It involves going beyond personal preferences

and value judgements toward a conception of literature as an order of words, a coherent structure in which works are related to each other like members of a large family, with a family tree traceable to the earliest times. It is the study of how the human imagination works as it creates art of words.

The sense of continuity, of one step leading to another, of details fitting gradually into a larger design, is essential to criticism. Good teachers of literature can help children to make sense out of their experience with stories and poems, to see patterns, to make connections, to draw significant, enlightening conclusions about form and structure, and to relate literary experience to their daily experience with other imaginative verbal structures such as those found in advertising, comics and popular music. They help young critics to see that literature, far from being merely a collection of unrelated poems and stories, is the continuous journal of the human imagination.

In helping children to grow as critics of literature, then, two aspects are essential. First, we must broaden their experience with literature. Through television, comics, series books and movies, most children are well-acquainted with the sub-literary culture. What they are likely to lack and therefore what schools and libraries must provide, is the experience of the best from among a wide variety of children's literature, old and new. Then, we must find ways appropriate for young critics to go beyond experiencing poems and stories toward insights into the significance of individual literary works and toward an understanding of literature as a coherent body of interrelated works, relating both to each other and to sub-literary forms such as advertisements, pop songs, comics and the situation comedies and police shows of television.

Getting children to read widely can be difficult. Youngsters are wary when it comes to food--and books, insisting that they don't like what they haven't even sampled. Children tend to prefer the familiar. In informal studies conducted by classroom teachers in my graduate classes, we discovered that, in general, students left entirely to themselves to select their recreational reading were likely to choose the same types of books all the time. Moreover, most readers regularly chose books that in readability offered them little or no challenge.

One boy concentrated solely on sports fiction; other children in the nine to twelve group read exclusively fictions depicting everyday life like those of Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, Carolyn Haywood and Ellen Conford. Several children never read fiction at all; they simply leafed their way through informational books, looking at the pictures. In every case, after a planned effort to introduce these children to challenging books that reflected their interests, all of them responded by reading more widely.

As part of their systematic effort to encourage wider reading, the teachers used interest inventories with their classes. Open-ended questions, like the following examples,elicited the best response:

When I grow up, I would like.....

During my free time, I enjoy.....

Outside of school, my main interest is.....

The kind of story I like best is.....

If I wrote a book, it would be about.....

Interest inventories, either formally administered in class or informally through conversations with children, proved to be invaluable aids to the teachers in their efforts to introduce children to books they hadn't tried. One teacher, discovering that a girl in her fifth grade enjoyed riding, drew up for her a personalized list of fine horse stories that included Marguerite Henry's <u>King of the Wind</u> and Walter Farley's <u>The Black Stallion</u>.

For a boy, an able reader in sixth grade, who revealed in his inventory that he lived to enjoy television shows dealing with the twilight zone of the supernatural, another teacher prepared a list that included John Christopher's The White Mountains, Natalie Babbitt's The Eyes of the Amaryllis and Penèlope Lively's The Ghost of Thomas Kempe.

Responding to negative comments about reading in her batch of inventories ("I'd rather do anything than read."), one of my students promised her resistant fourth graders books that were both funny and short. Her list, which helped to convert some non-readers, included Chocolate Fever by Robert K. Smith, Mr. Popper's Penguins by the Atwaters, The Twenty-One Balloons by William Pène du Bois and Lizard Music by Manus D. Pinkwater.

Word-of-mouth is always the best advertising for books. When I taught in Toronto in the fifties, we had no library in our old downtown school. Once a month my third graders trekked along College Street to Boys and Girls House, the children's room of the Central Public Library. At the end of our journey, we were rewarded with book talks, the librarians introducing, by telling and reading enticing snippets of stories, a wide variety of books, spanning a broad range of readability and content. Invariably, the books the librarians introduced, whether classic or contemporary, easy-to-read or challenging, were always those which the children chose to carry back to school with them.

The power of advertising, in particular the personal testimonial, is awesome. One teacher in my graduate class in children's literature initiated a campaign in her classroom to open the eyes of her sixth grade realists to the glories of modern fantasy. She read widely herself, determined to advertise the genre with the best possible books. Using a variety of sources for bibliographies, but especially the excellent Houghton Mifflin Riverside Anthology of Children's Literature, the teacher selected to personally advertise such books as Alan Garner's The Owl Service

Monica Hughes' The Keeper of the Isis Light, Jane Langton's The Fledgling, Ursula Le Guin's A Wizard of Earthsea and Jean Merrill's The Pushcart War.

This teacher featured displays of these books and others in her classroom, but the main part of her advertising campaign was oral. As she read the books, she noted passages in them that were particularly tantalizing; these she read aloud as she gave book talks. She took time to create brief scripts for Readers Theater, featuring passages of dialogue that were calculated to interest listeners in reading the entire book for themselves. Groups of children gave prepared readings of the scripts to the rest of the class. The teacher reported that, although her display included many more books than were presented through book talks and Readers Theater performances, the books that were personally introduced by these means were the ones the children clamored to read for themselves. Eventually, these sixth graders were giving their own book talks and preparing new scripts for Readers Theater. They developed an annotated list of their favorite works of modern fantasy which has become a resource for other classes, including my own.

Another teacher, who believes in the power of the personal testimonial to influence others to read and who deplores the formal written book report as the kiss of death for independent reading programs, initiated The Sixty-Second Salestalk in which her students had to "sell" to the class a book they had enjoyed. This lively method of reporting, the teacher found, was more effective by far than lists of books in persuading others to read what their classmates read with enjoyment. In addition, the children's composing of the timed talks gradually, with practice, became better-organized, more detailed and more innovative.

A librarian I know, realizing that too much time is wasted by children gazing at the spines of books on library shelves, provided them with lists based upon information gleaned from the interest inventories that she administered. Among the titles of her lists were "Ten Top

Authors of Mysteries," "Ten Golden Oldies," and "Ten to Make You Laugh Out Loud." Her suggestions were well-taken, since they reflected the interests of the children she served.

Book talks, Readers Theater presentations, displays, talks by authors, all these have proven successful in enlarging children's experience with fine books. Criticism is centered in knowledge and children grow as critics through wide reading of the best, the most challenging, the unusual books that are lost on library shelves unless someone finds them for young readers. But wide reading without study leaves readers in the same position as pianists who play be ear. They know when it sounds right, but they're usually not educated enough to know why. Good teaching both broadens experience and goes beyond it to develop insights that enrich and enlighten.

Having the opportunity to talk about what they hear and read helps children to grow as critics of literature. Planned discussions can form a valuable part of literary criticism at the elementary level. Training a class to discuss literary questions in small groups is a profitable endeavor. Groups are trained using a fishbowl approach in which a selected group of five to eight students discusses a question with the rest of the class listening and critiquing the process. Gradually children learn, first with the teacher and eventually a student acting as leader, to keep on-topic, to amend each others' ideas, to offer concrete evidence for opinions, to hear others out and to reach conclusions and make judgements.

Often it is best to begin a group's literary studies with the study of one novel, a work that has merit and significance both in content and structure. The story is presented as an entity so that children can experience the work of art as a whole before they begin study of it. Discussion centers around the elements common to all stories: character, point of view, plot, setting, mood, language, theme. Among the understandings

and skills essential for young critics to gradually develop are these: awareness of plot as a series of incidents or sequence of events through which the initial incident or story problem is resolved; skill in following sequence of events and predicting possible outcomes; awareness of the tension between character and incident; ability to "read" character through appearance, relationship to the environment, actions, thoughts, speech, reactions to others, reactions of others; ability to note the mood or tone of a story; awareness of how language is a means of establishing tone and mood; appreciation of humor, exaggeration, description, figurative language; ability to visualize and to react to sensory images; awareness of how setting, mood and plot interrelate.

Although each story is different, all stories are alike in that they are constructs of the same elements. To help readers transfer the knowledge they gain from the guided study of a novel to their independent reading of novels, as far as possible, content is discussed in terms of the form and structure of the story. To concentrate only on content is to limit the critical process. The following sample questions illustrate how content may be considered in terms of story form and structure:

> What incident, problem or conflict does the author use to get the story started? (Here readers and listeners focus on form, recognizing that a story begins at a particular point, usually with conflict, and moves through a middle toward an end where the conflict is resolved.)
>
> Suppose you thought of a different ending for the story. How would the rest of the story have to be changed to fit the new ending? (Consideration of this question helps readers to recognize unity in structure; a story is an organic whole, the ending inevitable, given its particular beginning and middle.)

(from The Child as Critic, 104-106)

The unit approach to literary study is an effective way to help young critics grow in making connections among literary works. The unit is a set of books, say three to five, related by theme, plot structure, topic, focus, style or any other common element. Through the use of carefully planned units, students learn, as Northrop Frye puts it, "that in literature you don't just read one poem or novel after another, but enter into a complete world of which every work of literature is a part." (The Educated Imagination, 27)

There are, of course, as many ways of organizing units as there are teachers and classes. The study of colonial America in social studies will be enhanced by a unit that features several of the fine books of historical fiction dealing with that period. Great literary themes such as survival or basic literary patterns like the quest provide significant focus for units of study. Such diverse topics as Giants, Bedtime or Peer Relationships are only a few of the countless choices available. A study of literary types such as the fable or cautionary tale is another way of setting up a unit. To focus on several works by the same author is yet another useful organizing principle.

Examination of the same theme treated from different viewpoints and using different literary techniques can lead to fruitful study. The often painful process of growing up into the knowledge and acceptance of a world that is far from perfect , for example, is the theme of Beverly Cleary's Dear Mr. Henshaw , a story told through letters, and of The Pigman by Paul Zindel, in which the two main characters take turns speaking to the reader in their own voices, and of Edgar Allan, a first-person narrative that details a twelve-year-old's struggles to understand the adult world.

Suppose, as an example of a unit, a teacher wants her fifth graders to grow in their critical understanding of the hero in literature. She has several objectives: to interest children in reading, in this case about people who overcome difficulties in spite of limitations in size, strength

and experience; to help children generalize from their experience with a select group of stories, formulating critical statements which apply to all such stories. The hero tale, for example, generally follows a pattern in which someone embarks on a quest to right a wrong, change a situation for the better or to reach a goal. The hero undergoes a series of tests or confrontations which lead to a climax or turning point that decides the success of the quest. The teacher wants her students to focus on the literary elements of plot, character, setting and theme and, by featuring hero stories separated in time, to see how themes, characters and story forms belong to one big interlocking family. Further, by relating classical hero stories to contemporary works and to sub-literary forms such as comics and current movies, she wants young critics to begin to see that there are relationships among all verbal imaginative constructs.

A unit on heroes properly begins with Biblical and Classical heroes because their stories are the structural forerunners of all the hero stories that follow them. The following books might constitute a nucleus for the unit:

Padriac Colum. The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles.

In lyrical prose well-suited to reading aloud, Colum weaves many strands of Greek mythology into a single tale.

Walter de la Mare. Stories from the Bible

Stories from the Old Testament told with vigor and beauty.

Howard Pyle. The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renown in Nottinghamshire

Robin Hood's story told in language well-suited to the tale.

Mary Steele. Journey Outside.

Dilar has the courage to trust his own judgement and seek a better life.

Patricia Lee Gauch. This Time, Tempe Wicke?

Tempe Wicke stands up to Revolutionary soldiers who try to steal her horse.

The chosen books, if not available in multiple copies, are presented to the children through the teacher's oral reading. Study by means of discussion, questioning and response follows, together with independent reading of related books. Into the discussion are brought all aspects of the children's literary and sub-literary experiences. Children will note, for instance, that James Bond's technological devices are as magical in effect as Perseus's Helmet of Hades, which made him invisible. Both Hercules and Superman have phenomenal strength and that strength is not unlike that of certain personified floor cleaners, paper towels or laundry soaps featured in imaginative advertisements created for television. The Force that is with Luke Skywalker today has, in one form or another, sustained heroes of all time.

Although the space of an article doesn't permit their full development, there are many other strategies that promote children's growth as critics of literature. Study may be organized around the different "kinds and orders of discourse," to use James Moffett's term for the many different conventions and modes of literature. Some stories, for example, are told in the form of plays. Literature comes in many forms other than the continuous narrative of the novel or biography: journals, memoirs, correspondence, essays, poetry. Through the study of these forms and subsequent writing in them, which is of course an important aspect of the critical process, the young critic begins to acquire a sense of the range and diversity of literature.

In Experiencing Children's Literature, Dianne Monson and Alan Purves apply Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature, in which reading is shown as a two-way process between reader and text, to children's

experience with literature. Experiencing a book, the reader makes many conscious as well as automatic decisions about certain aspects of the experience. In their efforts to help children to grow as critics of literature, teachers , by asking the right questions, can help children to clarify their perceptions about what a book is saying and how it is saying it. To help children monitor their transactions, Purves and Monson have developed questions designed to help readers become more consciously aware of the content and form of what they read as well as their personal response to it. "What is the shape of events in the work?" "Do they follow a sequence of time or space or logic?" are questions focusing on structure. A question about voice asks, "What voices are there in the work?" "Who is (are) speaking?" And questions about personal response include, "How do I feel about the people or the events?" In acknowledging that reading literature is a transaction in which the reader takes an active part in the action, teachers are helping young critics to grow by insisting that they ask "Why?" of their literary experiences with purpose and direction.

Criticism comes from Greek kritikos, meaning a"judge." A judge's right to be on the bench is based on his knowledge of the law. A literary critic's obligation is to know as much as possible about literature. It is the attempt of students of literature to interpret works of literature in the light of all the literature they know. Becoming a critic is a cumulative process that begins when we experience our first stories and poems. Experience, through study examined and clarified, leads to a conception of literature as a coherent structure, to an understanding of how imagination works in the creation of art in words. With this conception comes awareness of its significance in one's own life and in the lives of all. "Whatever value there is in studying literature, cultural or practical, comes from

the total body of our reading, the castle of words we've built, and keep adding new wings to all the time." (The Educated Imagination, 39.)

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